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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANAMA 000190

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SUBJECT: BLOCS IN THE NEWLY-ELECTED BAHRAINI PARLIAMENT

Classified By: DCM Susan L. Ziadeh for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary and Comment

¶1. (C) The two rounds of parliamentary elections conducted November 25 and December 2 brought in a Sunni majority (23 of 40 seats), 15 of whom are members of two Islamist political societies: Al Asala (Salafi), with eight seats, and Al Minbar (Muslim Brotherhood), with seven seats. Four of the eight remaining Sunnis are pro-government moderates who formed the independent bloc Al Mustaqbal (The Future), which hopes to provide a balance to more extreme policy proposals the Islamists may make. Three Sunni members are completely unassociated, while the one remaining Sunni opposes the government and will most often align himself with the Shia opposition. Leading Shia opposition society Al Wifaq won 17 seats in the parliament and represents the single largest bloc in the Council of Representatives (COR). The inability of moderates and liberal secularists to reach parliament contributes to the appearance that the battle lines are drawn between a Shia opposition and the Sunni-led government and their supporters. End summary and comment.

Al Minbar: Relatively Moderate Sunni Islamists

¶2. (SBU) Al Minbar is one of two Sunni Islamist political societies and is affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. It is the political wing of Al Islah (The Reform) charity society, the first and biggest Sunni charity society, established in the early 1970's. Members of Al Islah did not participate in the 1973 parliament or in any other political activities during that time, but in order to take part in the 2002 elections, it established Al Minbar Al Islami as its political branch. As Islamists, members of Al Minbar propose and support legislation related to religious affairs and morals.

¶3. (C) Despite the fact that Al Minbar and Al Asala have differing political philosophies and religious ideologies, they collaborated in the elections and came up with a joint list of candidates. This alliance sought to stand against the opposition, especially liberal, Sunni candidates from Wa'ad political society. Al Minbar ran eight candidates, including five incumbents and three new candidates. Only one candidate lost his race, incumbent Sa'adi Mohammed, who lost to an independent businessman. Al Minbar's chairman, physician Salah Ali, was voted into the leadership position of second deputy speaker by his fellow MPs. Chairman Ali's moderate image is in marked contrast with that of Al Minbar member Shaikh Mohammed Khalid, who publicly expresses virulently anti-American views. Al Minbar has appointed a new spokesperson, Dr. Ali Ahmed, who is well educated, known to be open-minded and moderate, and avoids giving

controversial statements. Despite many attempts and invitations, no Al Minbar MP has met with Embassy staff in well over a year. An Al Minbar MP admitted to PolFSN that Al Minbar had adopted a policy of not meeting with American officials to protest U.S. policy in the region.

Al Asala: Salafis in the Modern Age

¶4. (SBU) The other major Sunni Islamist political society is Al Asala, affiliated with Salafi Al Tarbiya Al Islamiya (Islamic Education) charity society. In the parliamentary elections, Al Asala nominated six candidates (three incumbents, three new) and won five races. In addition, three members of the new COR who ran as independents, including two incumbents, decided to join Al Asala, so it now has eight members in the COR. Members of Al Asala are from the Sunni Salafi trend of Islam, which promotes a highly literal interpretation of Islam and the Koran.

¶5. (C) From 2002 to 2004, Al Asala was led by Shaikh Adel Al Ma'awada, who was the second deputy speaker in the previous parliament. In 2004, Ghanim Al Buainain became the chairman of Al Asala. Al Buainain, who has a BA in history from Beirut Arab University and a post-graduate diploma in Islamic studies, is open to establishing relationships with all parQs in the parliament. Al Buainain has been an active member of the COR and his moderate stance has allowed him to build bridges with others in the COR. He was elected first deputy speaker this term by MPs. Al Asala has been active in submitting proposals promoting greater adherence to Islamic law. Al Asala successfully lobbied the King to allow women to drive while being completely veiled, legislation that had

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been previously rejected by parliament. Al Asala is open to contact and relationships with American officials. The Ambassador meets periodically with Al Buainain, who has attended Embassy representational events, and he has visited Al Ma'awada at his majles.

Al Wifaq: A Coalition of Shia Islamists

¶6. (SBU) Al Wifaq political society, which boycotted the 2002 parliamentary elections, represents the Shia community and is the largest bloc in the new parliament. It won 17 seats, over 40% of the parliament and an increase of five over the number of Shia members in the previous parliament. The Al Wifaq bloc includes five clerics, two academics, and three former municipal council members. Al Wifaq published a comprehensive election agenda that includes policies on political, economic, and legal issues, such as unemployment, housing, Bahrain's foreign debt, the U.S.-Bahrain free trade agreement, education and training, women's empowerment, and infrastructure development. Al Wifaq seeks to amend legislation related to assembly and press freedoms to provide for greater freedom of expression. Constitutional changes are also among Al Wifaq's priorities, but it has decided to postpone pushing this issue until next year.

¶7. (C) Al Wifaq looks to its leader Shaikh Ali Salman, who is Al Wifaq's secretary general and a former exile, to establish good relations with the government and other parliamentary blocs and to work cooperatively with them. Al Wifaq spokesperson Khalil Al Marzooq, chairman of the COR Legal Affairs Committee, has also assumed a leadership role within the bloc. Representing Bahrain's majority Shia population, Al Wifaq has the most to gain from greater moves toward democracy and the principle of "one person, one vote." Al Wifaq was an enthusiastic participant in MEPI-funded National Democratic Institute programming. The group is open to and seeks contact with all levels of USG officials.

Al Mustaqbal Bloc: Pro-Government Moderates

¶8. (SBU) Al Mustaqbal is a new bloc in parliament made up of four newly-elected members who have strong connections to the government. Adel Al Asoomi, who took the initiative to form the bloc, is a pro-government businessman with a close relationship to the Prime Minister. It is likely that the bloc will focus on business issues as well as improving the standard of living for the Bahraini people. Included in this bloc is the first female member of parliament, Latifa Al Qa'oud, who won her seat unopposed. Al Qa'oud, who was an official in the Finance Ministry, is the deputy chair of the COR's Financial and Economic Affairs Committee.

Unassociated Members

¶9. (C) There are four unassociated members in the new parliament. Dr. Abdulaziz Abul, chair of the Financial and Economic Affairs Committee, was strongly supported by Al Wifaq during the campaign and will support the Al Wifaq bloc on most of its proposals. Abul, who obtained a doctorate in international relations from the U.S., is a former exile and a leading progressive liberal. He is also the secretary general of the Constitutional Conference, a group that has held annual conferences to push for constitutional changes. Abdulla Al Doseri is an incumbent who was the spokesperson for the pro-government Independent bloc in the previous parliament. Independent Salafi Jasim Al Saeedi, who is so extreme that even Al Asala does not want to be associated with him, is deputy chair of the Legal Affairs Committee and is also an incumbent. Finally, Khalifa Al Dhahrani was elected to continue in his role as COR speaker, as he was in the previous parliament.

Parliamentary Bloc Rosters

¶10. (SBU) Al Minbar bloc members: Dr. Salah Ali Mohammed (chairman), Dr. Ali Ahmed (deputy, spokesperson), Dr. Abdullatif Al Shaikh, Mohammed Khalid, Sami Qambar, Ebrahim Al Hadi, and Naser Al Fadhal.

Al Asala bloc members: Ghanim Al Buainain (chairman), Shaikh Adel Al Mo'awada, Hamad Al Muhannadi, Sami Al Buhairi, Isa Abul Fateh, Abdulhaleem Murad, Ebrahim Busandal, and Khamees Al Rumaihi.

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Al Wifaq bloc members: Shaikh Ali Salman (chairman), Khalil Al Marzooq (spokesperson), Abdulhussain Al Mutaqawi, Mohammed Jameel Al Jamri, Dr. Jasim Hussain, Jawad Fairouz, Jalal Fairouz (brother to Jawad), Shaikh Hassan Sultan, Shaikh Jasim Al Mu'min, Abduljalil Khalil, Mohammed Miz'al, Sayed Jameel Kadhim, Sayed Abdulla Al A'ali, Dr. Abdali Mohammed Hassan, Sayed Haider Al Sitri, Shaikh Hamza Al Dairi, and Sayed Makki Al Widae.

Al Mustaqbal bloc members: Adel Al Asoomi (chairman), Latifa Al Qa'oud, Hassan Al Doseri, and Abdulrahman Bumjaid.

Unassociated members: Khalifa Al Dhahrani (COR Speaker), Dr. Abdulaziz Abul, Jasim Al Saeedi, and Abdulla Al Doseri.

COR Leadership

¶11. (SBU) Speaker of the COR: Khalifa Bin Ahmed Al Dhahrani, speaker of the previous parliament, is an independent Sunni with a close relationship with the royal

family. Despite clashes with some of the members of the previous parliament, including Salafis, his quiet yet strong leadership has made him successful in his management of parliamentary discussions. During the election, Al Dhahrani was strongly supported by Al Minbar and Al Asala against a candidate who is a gadfly member of the royal family. Al Dhahrani was a member of the 1973 parliament and was a Shura Council member between 1992 and 2002. He runs his own business in the construction field.

First Deputy Speaker: Ghanim Al Buainain is a pro-government Sunni Salafi who has a post-graduate diploma in Islamic studies and was formerly a director of administration and personnel affairs at the Ministry of Municipalities. He is a founding member of Al Asala political society. He and other members of Al Asala focus on proposals that reinforce Islamic Sharia law and improve the living standards of the people.

Second Deputy Speaker: Dr. Salah Ali has been chairman of Al Minbar's parliamentary bloc since 2002. He is a pro-government Sunni Islamist with a close relationship with the royal court. Ali, who ran unopposed in 2002, received a degree in surgery from Riyadh University, a master's degree in public health from the U.S. and an MD in family medicine.

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